

Testimony of Kelly Phenix before the Human Services Committee

January 29, 2015

Regarding: S.B. NO. 280 (Raised) an Act Concerning the Department of Social Services

Senator Moore, Representative Abercrombie and members of the Human Services Committee, my name is Kelly Phenix. I have been an appointed member of the Behavioral Health Partnership Oversight Council (BHPOC) as a Consumer Representative since August 2010. I am very well versed in the operation of DSS, DCF and DMHAS programs and services. I have been a recipient of Husky and am currently on the SNAP Benefit program.

I am here today to comment on S.B. NO. 280 (Raised) an Act Concerning the Department of Social Services, its statement of purpose: "To study programs offered by DSS to determine efficacy and needs". I feel that any study at this point would be a waste of time and money, money better spent on improving access and hiring staff to address issues that the Commissioner is already very well aware of. The Husky program currently serves 750,000 residents; the SNAP program serves 243,000 households and 439,000 individuals. The most frustrating and dysfunctional areas of DSS are, the application and redetermination process and the benefit call center.

In June of 2014, the Adult Quality and Access Sub-Committee of the BHPOC submitted questions to the Commissioner of DSS. He responded in part by saying that the beginning and end of the month are the heaviest for call volume, with on hold wait times up to 2 hours and an average of 69% abandonment rate. Is there really a need for a study to prove the problem is simple supply and demand? DSS cannot possibly handle the volume of need with the lack of staff and computer systems they currently have.

I would like to share with you an experience my friend Christina had with Husky for her 12 year old daughter. Three months after submitting redetermination forms, before their due date, for two adults and two children in her household, she received a notice that her daughter was being dropped from Husky coverage as of the 1st of the month because a redetermination form was not submitted. I was with her when she called the benefit line. While she was on hold, I had her set up a ConnecCT account on the DSS website. Her daughter's status was listed as "ineligible" but no further information could be obtained. After 1 hour and 20 minutes of being on hold, her call was answered, she explained her situation, and the worker looked up her account. The system was incorrectly showing income and employment information from 5 years ago, even though Christina had properly filled out every redetermination form, her account was never updated. After correcting the errors, the worker reinstated the child's coverage. I cannot think of any company whose customers would find 1 to 2 hours of time on hold acceptable customer service. Is there any reason why DSS should not be held to the same standards of customer service as any other business?

This past November I applied for SNAP benefits for myself using the online ConneCT. I found the process to be easy and user friendly. About a week later I received a phone call from DSS to "interview" me for eligibility. I was told that I was approved and would receive benefits at the beginning of December. A few days later I received a notice that I was not eligible, citing an out of date employer as the reason. I called the Benefit line, prepared to be on hold for a long time; however I couldn't even get to the point of being on hold. I was sent in circles of pressing numbers trying to get to the right queue for my call. Frustrated I finally gave up. I received a notice the next day in the mail that I was approved. The only thing I felt I could do was to wait for December 3rd to see if my SNAP benefits were deposited into my account. Thankfully they were, but while waiting I was unnecessarily stressed and worried that I may not have enough to eat, all because DSS is inadequately staffed and their computer systems antiquated.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I ask that while you are listening to testimonies today; please try to put yourself in their shoes. No one wants to be in the financial situation that qualifies you for DSS programs. How would you feel if you were the one on hold for 2 hours only to be told your benefits had been dropped by mistake because of an antiquated computer system? As I stated previously, the biggest problem with the system is supply and demand, I am asking you to please not let this go on any longer....the residents of Connecticut deserve better.